

Heat Stroke Prevention and Treatment Information

Many serious problems encountered by dogs avoidable. Heat stroke is a condition wherein the dog loses its native ability to control its body temperature becomes overheated and suffers damage to its body as a result. It is avoidable in most situations.

Dogs cannot sweat for cooling as we do. They use their respiratory system for primary cooling. Panting leads to evaporation of moisture from the tongue. Evaporation removes excess body heat. Any circumstance that leads to overwhelm of this cooling system can result in overheating. If body core temperatures exceed 105-106 degree Fahrenheit, then body tissues, particularly the brain can be damaged leading to serious, even life threatening disease states.

Several things can predispose a pet to overheating: (1) Environmental temperature and humidity; (2) Physical activity generates higher body core temperatures; (3) Larger body sizes and obesity increase heat retention; (4) Dehydration; (5) Insufficient shade or area to escape direct sun exposure; (6) Insufficient ventilation (a slight breeze can cool considerably); (7) Body coat color and type (dark coats absorb heat); (8) Drugs (antihistamines and tranquilizers); (9) General health states (old age and diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, and hormonal irregularities can make pets more prone to overheating; and (10) Breed (short nosed breeds like Boxers, Pugs, English Bull dogs, and Boston Bull dogs are all much more prone to overheating).

A dog suffering from heat stroke will walk irregularly or sit down and refuse to move. It will have gums that are muddy colored instead of pink, they pant excessively and may drool excessively. Any dog acting in this manner should have its rectal temperature determined immediately. Any temperature over 103 degrees should prompt quick action to cool the dog. If no thermometer is available it is strongly advised to simply begin emergency treatment. Get the dog into shade and provide ventilation (a tarp or shaded area with a fan). Run cool (not cold water) over the dog. Putting a hose on the abdomen and area where the legs attach helps cool quicker. Use of water that is too cold simply closes down skin blood vessels and makes it harder to cool the dog, so don't use ice or cold water. Most of the cooling comes from evaporation of the water from the skin. Be sure the dog is in open air so evaporation can occur. Take the temperature every 5-15 minutes and transport the dog to the veterinarian as soon as the temperature has dropped somewhat. Veterinary evaluation and treatment with fluids and anti-inflammatory medications may be needed to prevent brain swelling, kidney damage, liver damage, and other complications of heat stroke.

Prevention is the key to good health. It is far easier to NOT leave the dog in the car than it is to treat heat stroke. Vehicle temperatures and humidity can rise so rapidly even in early spring and late fall seasons. Make sure your pet had adequate water and shade and keep a close eye on dogs that are working or hiking as they can be suddenly overcome by heat exhaustion and heat stroke. If your pet is ill or has other health challenges, particularly if it is on medication, be sure to discuss acceptable levels of activity with your veterinarian.